H-Diplo Roundtables

Bruce Kuklick. Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger. Princeton University Press, 2006.

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Commentary by Anders Stephanson, Columbia University

Blind Oracles is one of the stranger works I've read in recent years. It is full of arguments, many of them thoughtful, lucid, and informative; but it has no argument. The reason it has no argument is that it has no real problem to begin with, or, more precisely, the problem it poses can have no real answer. Kuklick is too intelligent an observer not to be aware of this, which is why, I think, he is calling his work a 'meditation.' And an open-ended meditation indeed it is, whatever the initial claims for a case study of the workings of knowledge and 'men of knowledge' in politics. In the end, Kuklick's advice regarding advice is that we just stumble on and hope that good advice from people who know more rather than less will result in, or at least support, policies that have good rather than bad outcomes, though we won't know until after the fact, if at all. All right, then, upwards and onwards? Kuklick, alas, is not in a good mood; and his darkest thoughts are in fact reserved for those who know better, or claim to know better. The complaint of this intellectual, in the end, is about intellectuals or people he thinks of as intellectuals. Nietzschean ressentiment?

But perhaps it is better to begin by investigating another peculiarity of this interesting opus, namely, what the meditation actually uses by way of empirical materials, its food for thought so to speak. Concretely, what kind of book is this? Who are the putatively blind oracles? At first sight, the specific history at hand seems almost depressingly familiar in its contours and in its substance. After a background sketch of traditional intellectual origins (pragmatism, Dewey, positivism, Nagel et al) in the United States, Kuklick goes down the well-trodden path from operations research, bombing surveys in World War II, systems analysis and game theory to the eventual apotheosis of something parading as theory and its application to policy in the rather unappetizing form of the RAND corporation: the usual suspects, in other words, though some individuals are oddly absent (such as Samuel Huntington, a prize exhibit one would have thought).

This emergent tradition is contrasted (again, the story is well-known) with another emergent but less culturally sanctioned tradition, that of classical realism (Kennan, Morgenthau, Neustadt to some extent but not really, Kissinger of course) for whom policy is always more about judgment in the Kantian sense, an aesthetic form of appreciating particulars, rather than the application of some model onto a pristine set of definable problems. To this second and more critical position, Kuklick is less hostile though ultimately as we shall see he takes them (wrongly in my view) to task for being incoherent about the real world. Curiously, it is two realists (Kennan and Kissinger) who grace the cover of the book and apparently serve to exemplify

oracles and blindness; whereas in fact neither is among the blinder of the blind in Kuklick's account, to introduce degrees in that which perhaps can have no degrees. The trajectory proper is not as the subtitle indicates ('from Kennan to Kissinger') either: it is not about 'intellectuals' moving from the starting position of the one to the other, except in some quite formal and necessarily superficial temporal way (say, the 1940s through the 1970s). The real complaint is not about realists but about its rival form of approach to knowledge and the production of policy during that epoch or those epochs. Kennan, incidentally, gets fairly short shrift in the proceedings, a mere five pages or so, while Kissinger is honoured with a whole chapter. This is justifiable in view of the latter's greater political impact and importance, but it should be said in passing that Kuklick's remarks on Kennan (of whom I wish to say nothing more except that he did not come from a 'well to do family,' certainly not by Princetonian standards) are not among his most probing here; the analysis of Kissinger is in every respect superior.

The RAND connection (with Paul Nitze putting in a more or less constant appearance in the shadows) is then pursued during the chilly years of the Eisenhower years and the subsequent moment in the sun under JFK, which is also, famously, the moment of the best and the brightest. Potted histories, personal and institutional, are provided of such leading figures as the Wohlstetters, William Kaufmann, Thomas Schelling, along with Harvardians Neustadt, Rostow, the Bundies, Graham Allison et al, plus the generic Robert McNamara. The story climaxes with Vietnam, the height of intelligent folly or foolish intelligence; and in the Pentagon Papers (designed in Kuklick's view to exonerate the intellectuals by blaming the stupid military) and the strange and symptomatic career of Daniel Ellsberg. If this sounds, then, like a story about individuals we've known for quite some time, it should be emphasized that Kuklick's sketches contain some incisive critiques and the survey itself is on the whole useful as intellectual history (I myself was especially impressed by the 'cases' of Kaufmann and Neustadt, the latter having been an early, personal source of inspiration for Kuklick's history in the late 1970s). The intellectual streaks are coupled with an account of 'real' history, a parallel universe of what actually happened that is meant to serve as a measure, a measure of truth as a matter of fact which allows Kuklick to decide who is to be blamed, when and where (though he says that this is not what he wants to do).

One can take issue with the particulars of this history and these histories but the generalities involved are more interesting to pursue. Two empirical points, nevertheless, seem worth making, before I pass on to a some more conceptual criticisms and open-ended queries:

(i) It is wrong to say (as is almost always done) that Paul Nitze 'drafted' NSC 68. Nitze supervised the committee in the PPS that did draft it and he certainly 'authored' the position and recommendations it expressed; but I am convinced that he is actually responsible for very little of the actual composition of most of the document, which is stylistically, thematically and not least rhetorically far removed from everything else he wrote. The most notorious passage (wherein it is said, in effect, that only those means are bad which are instrumentally counterproductive and that none other should be counted out, certainly not on any ethical grounds), a passage that contradicts sharply other parts of the paper, was written by John Paton Davies, something I've always found darkly amusing since this conservative realist was about to be banished from the State Department for being a crypto-pinkie, supremely unsound on China, if not an actual traitor responsible for its 'loss.'

(ii) The important case study of case studies, the Cuban Missile Crisis, is inadequately laid out in that the targeting and lethality of the missiles, not to mention the existence of relatively autonomous nuclear submarine off the US coast, remain excluded from Kuklick's matrix of decision. The recommendation to invade would have been even more disastrous than we used to think. McNamara is thus wholly right now to echo (as does Kuklick himself) Dean Acheson's verdict that the positive resolution of the crisis had less to do with superior intelligence than with 'dumb luck' - and this (as he also says) was the best managed crisis in post-war history.

(iii) Speaking of nuclear weapons and the Cuban Missile Crisis, I was struck once again by their apparently intrinsic capability of killing ideology, or more precisely, cold war ideology. Kuklick brings forth Schelling's exemplary metaphors of a traffic jam and children's education in the _Strategy of Conflict_ (1960): rationality in a messy traffic jam could be compared to the rationality of limited war, and deterrence in dealing with Moscow was similar to the deterrence involved in teaching one's children. The problems (such as unintended consequences) attached to both situations are however less interesting to me than the essentially 'technical' essentialism of game theory in general: a game, after all, presumes some kind of recognition of legitimate participation, if not equality, which is exactly the sort of thing that the cold war, as a US project, refused to accord to the Soviet Union. A game (involving 'signalling') recognizes not only participation but, obviously, interaction. Seeing the essence of the conflict as a 'game,' then, implied recognition and some kind of sameness somewhere, not a surprising development as nuclear conflagration entailed the obvious risk of mutual annihilation; 'sameness' indeed. If one begins to think up 'games' in which the predicaments of decision-making of the other side are identical to one's own, the system is by definition similar to a traditional conflict, whether it be war or some other kind. Inversely, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the other side as some somewhat diabolically fanatical conquerors of the world, devoid of all rationality accept that of destroying the enemy. The 'game' assumes that their rationality is our rationality. This is one reason the cold war, in essence, was over by 1963; policy becomes a problem of 'management' instead, manipulating existing resources in the best possible way for limited gains. Mere management is incompatible with the unconditional surrender which was always the overdeterminant of the US project known as the cold war. After 1963, then, the conflict is no longer about eradication of the evil empire (Reagan will reinvent that briefly of course but that's another story). If there is a cold war afterwards in the 1960s, it involves the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, though of course that conflict, unlike that of the United States and the Soviet Union, got to be a hot one in 1969 so the metaphor doesn't quite work here.

(iv) Kuklick, largely following his former colleague Marc Trachtenberg's account, is also keen on seeing some sort of break in 1963 but he's not really concerned with the cold war. It is not his problematic so to speak. The subtitle speaks of 'intellectuals and war' and indeed Kuklick seems to conflate, intermittently, reflection about war and reflection about politics: the former stands metonymically for the latter, which is arguable but not in fact argued here. What excites Kuklick's interest, as mentioned, is how 'intellectuals,' widely defined, perform their advising duties, how their knowledge serves policy articulation, if indeed it does, specifically during a long period in which war is at the centre of that policy. He's also interested in the degree to which knowledge drives or merely reflects policy. At hand, then, is ostensibly a work within a genre that used to be referred to as the sociology of knowledge. Kuklick's sociology, however,

includes very little by way of sociological consideration on what might be called the peculiarities of the policymaking universe of the United States: the permeability of the border between state and society, especially the state and the academy, the variability of personnel, the sudden political shifts from Administration to Administration, the attitudes towards learning and expertise (not to be confused, for example, with the figure of 'wisdom'), the superficial anchoring of all things 'foreign' in the ruling classes and corresponding lack of continuity and clarity in grand policy, US exceptionalism, etc etc. However one chooses to see these 'features,' it appears necessary to offer some systematic account in that regard (or more systematic than Kuklick gives, the forays into intellectual history notwithstanding) if the inquiry is to yield properly telling answers. In what other country can 'knowledgeable' people come to play a similar role in what has always been the most tradition-bound, controlled place of policy-formation, the exclusive domain of a very limited set of politicians and mandarins? It is hard, surely, to speak of a case study of something without such an account; and, besides, I can't see what kind of knowledge a 'case study' here could possibly generate, if it is indeed conceived in those terms. Case studies tend by nature to be hostile to temporality and hence also history. The relative absence of sociological exploration is at any rate one reason Kuklick ends up with such vague and uncertain conclusions. Nothing determinable can be said, as nothing has been determined.

(v) All of which leads to a related and more fundamental problem with the problem, namely, the concepts of knowledge and policy. There is nothing inherently wrong in counterposing them, as Kuklick does de facto in counterposing intellectuals and policymakers and then pursuing the troublesome overlap. The distinction, in short, is everywhere presupposed. Kuklick's uncertain complaint, then, has to do both with the kind of knowledge these historically specific intellectuals provide and how they bring it to bear on the 'real' world, i.e. the policymaking one. Often the knowledge is bad, mostly, he seems to indicate, because it is ahistorical, not to say off the wall; and often the 'men of knowledge' become intellectually opportunistic because they play obsequious games with people in power (I must add, however, that rarely are the 'men of knowledge' really oracles, blind or otherwise, in Kuklick's account). This is fair enough as far as it goes: let us not take 'men of knowledge' too seriously but then again let's not do without them either. Kuklick, nevertheless, might have pursued with greater rigour the issue of what constitutes 'knowledge' in the first place. Clearly, no policy can be formulated or carried out without knowledge of some sort. In foreign policy, as it emerges as a terrain distinct from the 'domestic' after the 16th and 17th century, policy-formation makes extensive use of 'intelligence' about the outside, estimates of strength and intentions and so forth; but its chief intellectual quality overall, given the premium on traditional prudence, is probably 'wisdom,' a generalized, almost attitudinal sort of experiential knowledge of the world and its putative dangers. Lots of interesting things, I imagine, can be said against that backdrop about what happens in the United States after 1945, about the preconditions for 'knowing' and what passes for what it is to know, what the given knowledge includes and excludes, who is authorized to speak and on what conditions. Kuklick's study goes some way in opening this up but not at all as far as it might have. One way of doing that would have been to push the traditional realist critique a bit further.

(vi) Kuklick's critique of that critique (with which he otherwise feels a certain affinity) has to do with the incapacity of realists to be realistic. Morgenthau and Kissinger (and by extension

Kennan) are taken to task for invoking supposedly eternal, iron laws of history and geopolitics, 'realities' as it were, and perpetually predicting doom and gloom if one (the US) keeps ignoring them. Three things (I extrapolate from Kuklick's remarks) are wrong about that position: a) there are no atemporal rules or realities of this kind and hence no general injunction to follow them; b) insofar as they exist in the actual here and now, it is not necessarily right to follow them; and c) US policymakers don't have much of a choice, given background, culture and domestic politics. I concur, though the 'choice' (c) is probably a lot greater than often assumed. Where I differ from Kuklick, however, is on the implication that the realists are 'inconsistent' about the dangers of not recognizing the alleged verities of power politics. They may be historically and conceptually wrong about that but they are not necessarily inconsistent. They genuinely thought there would be great perils and penalties for ignoring the realities. In some ways they were right but on the whole not; Kennan, to his great sorrow, always grasped somewhere that this was indeed so: horrible peril yes in the form of nuclear war, but short of that not much by way of penalty. I return to the 'sociological peculiarities:' the United States, given its enormous power, can be wholly unrealist and largely unrealistic and still be hugely successful in its foreign endeavours. Much of the cold war policy, for instance, was based on completely imaginary spectres and dangers (Guatemala anyone?), but it 'worked' pretty well. The only reality check (I apologize for the term) in the postwar epoch was Vietnam. We'll see if Iraq and the 'war on terror(ism),' at once imaginary and real, turns out to be another one. I suspect not. Meanwhile, one might remark that it was precisely the lack of reality checks that allowed all manner of 'knowledge' and 'men of knowledge' to come into play. Vietnam, and Vietnam alone, punished and disgraced some of it and some of them. One must then add immediately that the kind of knowledge that the United States can put into play is limited and determined by a very peculiar history. A case? I doubt it. Then again, to resent the 'intellectuals,' whatever their occular shortcomings, is to obfuscate the real workings of power.

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